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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001117

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PINR KDEM SOCI LE
SUBJECT: HARIRI SUMMONS SUNNI POWER, BUT REVEALS
INEXPERIENCE

REF: BEIRUT 624

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lebanese contacts from across the political spectrum perceive Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri's emphasis on the constitutional authorities of the prime minister as a strong defense of "Sunni power." However, Hariri's redesignation without support from either of the country's Shia parties strengthened the image of Hariri as a Sunni leader at the expense of his national image, some believe. Sunnis, feeling besieged, have banded around Hariri, but some have questioned his leadership qualities and political performance of late. Hariri's disinclination to collaborate with other prominent Sunni figures has led several Embassy contacts to point out the challenges he faces if he does not broaden his circle of advisors. End summary.

SUNNI RHETORIC BANDS SECT

¶2. (C) Hariri's insistence on the "constitutional authority" of the PM-designate in the current cabinet formation debate is seen within the Sunni community and the Lebanese population in general as a defiant defense of Sunni prerogatives, a broad range of Embassy contacts tell us. Although never publicly drawing attention to sectarian divisions of power, Hariri's repetitive references to the role and rights of the prime minister bolster his Sunni identity as prime minister at the expense of his national image, they say. Hariri's September re-designation as prime minister without support of the two main Shia parties served to highlight his image as a Sunni leader, rather than as a multiconfessionally-supported prime minister. In particular, the decision of Shia parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri to withhold his previous backing for Hariri magnified the PM-designate's lack of support across the Sunni-Shia divide, contacts report.

¶3. (C) Feeling besieged, the Sunni community is banding around Hariri, independent Tripoli politician Khaldoun Sharif and other Sunni embassy contacts have said. According to Sunni religious and political interlocutors, Lebanon's Sunnis see the refusal of Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun and Shia Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah to accommodate Hariri as an attack not only on Hariri, but also more broadly on the rights of the Sunnis. Sensitive to attempts to

rebalance the post-Taif confessional system, which strengthened the role of the Sunni prime minister at the expense of the Christian president, Sunnis are particularly wary of Aoun and President Michel Sleiman's support of constitutional adjustments that could reallocate institutional authority at the expense of the Sunnis.

HARIRI LACKS POLITICAL TOUCH,
SUPPORTERS ADMIT

¶4. (C) Although all contacts agree that Hariri is currently the undisputed head of the Sunni community, he has struggled to live up to his father's skills as a leader. Contacts say the younger Hariri, raised in Saudi Arabia, does not yet have a feel for the Sunni street or Lebanese politics in general. Many contacts point to Hariri's public speaking skills, a key tool of politicians in the Arab world. Despite a marked recent improvement, his ability to rally his base still lags behind that of his Christian ally Samir Geagea and Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

¶5. (C) Lacking the charisma to inspire on his own, Hariri has relied on anti-Hizballah rhetoric to solidify his support, thereby enflaming Sunni-Shia tensions, chairman of Arab ICT companies and campaign manager for March 14's "Zahle in the Heart" parliamentary bloc Nizar Zakka explained. During the June 2009 parliamentary elections, March 14 stoked fear about the international community's reaction to a Hizballah victory in order to curry votes (reftel). In contrast, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri insisted that his sister, Sidon MP and caretaker Education Minister Bahia Hariri -- who had to run

on Speaker Berri's list in Sidon in order to be elected in the predominantly Shia district -- participate actively in the Amal parliamentary bloc. She also attended all bloc meetings in an effort to bridge the Sunni-Shia divide.

GOING IT ALONE

¶6. (C) Coupled with his inexperience, a shallow pool of advisors has handicapped Hariri's ability to devise long-term strategies for the Sunni community, leaving the sect only to "react" to current events, Dar el-Fatwa member Bassam Barghout assessed. Independent Sunni leaders Fouad Mahzumi and Hani Nsouli noted that although they disagreed with former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on many issues, the elder Hariri still sought their opinions. Barghout, who works with Saad Hariri through the Dar el-Fatwa, has advised the PM-designate to collaborate with other Sunni leaders -- including former PM Najib Mikati and caretaker Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi -- to develop a unified stance on best steps for the community. However, Hariri, who dismissed many of his father's seasoned advisors, has thus far not sought counsel outside a small inner circle. Institutional alternatives to Hariri are weak. Dar el-Fatwa, the supreme Sunni council in Lebanon, could itself play a unifying role in the Sunni community or an advisory role to Hariri. However, Sunni Mufti Qabbani, reportedly on the Hariri payroll since the days of Rafiq, is seen as a puppet within the community.

MONEY AND RIYADH
PRESERVE SAAD

¶7. (C) Sunnis outside of the Future Movement point to the impact of Hariri wealth, Saudi Arabia's support for Saad, the legacy of his father, and the lack of alternatives to explain why -- despite his shortcomings -- the younger Hariri maintains his hold on the Sunni community. Lebanese Sunnis have traditionally looked to Saudi Arabia for protection and patronage, and as long as Riyadh backs Hariri and channels its aid through him, most Lebanese Sunnis will continue to look to him, non-Future members say. Even Sunnis who do not support Hariri admit that he is the country's Sunni "leader."

BUT THREATS REMAIN

¶18. (C) The Sunni community's support for Hariri is nonetheless limited, independent Beirut businessman Hani Nsouli, scion of a traditionally influential Sunni family, noted. Nsouli, whose well-known last name provides him a degree of political cover, went so far as to pen a letter to Saudi Arabia's ambassador in Lebanon questioning Riyadh's stalwart backing of Hariri despite his continued political missteps and arguing that Hariri's lagging leadership was weakening the Sunni community in Lebanon.

¶19. (C) Rivals within and outside the Sunni community are looking for ways to exploit any missteps by Hariri. Hizballah representatives visited Nsouli in recent months, he said, to offer money for his allegiance, suggesting that the opposition is seeking to capitalize on any fractures within the Sunni community. Likewise, while former Prime Minister Najib Mikati has voiced support for Hariri, Mikati's absence at the first meeting of majority MPs in late September was widely interpreted as an attempt by Mikati to forge a middle-ground position that would allow him to return as prime minister if Hariri failed to form a cabinet.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Hariri's recent rhetoric, which subtly plays on the country's political and sectarian divisions, has united the Sunnis behind him while simultaneously magnifying his political inexperience. Hariri, who has not been challenged by rivals within the Sunni community, has not thus far paid a price among his base for his political missteps. Many believe that Mikati and Safadi are biding their time, though, in the event that respect for Hariri's leadership abilities falters in the future.

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